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Making Art History Come Alive In The Online Classroom

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Abstract

Student engagement, development of critical thinking, and fostering original ideas are among the many challenges of online course design. This concern is particularly pertinent for courses in humanities, where the lack of face to face interaction and group discussions needs to be compensated with other methods resulting in similarly successful learning outcomes.

Since most of the communication and exchange of ideas in the online classroom takes place in discussion threads, designing intellectually stimulating and motivating discussion topics is instrumental for fostering students' enthusiasm for the subject. The paper discusses learner engagement strategies the author has developed, experimented with and found to be effective in asynchronous art history online courses. It argues that assignments placing students in imaginary situations within the cultural environments of particular historical periods promote critical thinking and encourage students to explore social, political, and religious conditions of the societies in which works of art were produced. Allowing students to choose the format for their discussion posting is another factor that contributes to motivating and engaging students.

The paper presents several types of assignments which make art history come alive, such as reenactment of competitions, acting as historical figures, commissioning artworks, assuming personalities of famous artists. These intellectually stimulating topics encourage learners to show their creative talent in a variety of discussion posting formats, ranging from poetry to play scenes. Seeing the history of art unfold through the eyes of its participants motivates online learners and personalizes their learning experience, compelling them to exercise both curiosity and creativity – essential components of engaged learning.

1. Art History in the Online Environment

Online course development changes the traditional understanding of instructional design. Many pedagogical issues need to be redefined in online instructional design: content delivery, creating collaborative learning environment, establishing effective student-instructor and student-student interaction, engaging students, encouraging critical thinking, ensuring students' command of the material. Some of these problems are discipline-specific. While every course needs serious rethinking when offered online, the adaptation of art history courses to the online environment is particularly difficult because of the discussion-intensive nature of art history instruction.

Among the many new issues that need to be addressed in the online environment, instructors consider development of critical thinking skills and fostering original ideas especially challenging [1]. This concern is particularly pertinent for art history, which, more than any other discipline, involves critical thinking. A big part of learning of art historical material is the critical analysis of individual artworks, artists and even entire periods or styles of art. In-class discussion is a vital part of traditional art history instruction. It is during these discussions that students express their own ideas about works of art, suggest different "readings" of the same painting or sculpture, learn how to connect the artworks with historical and religious realities of the society, see signs of the artist's own feelings in his or her art, encounter particular trends, tastes, aesthetic preferences. Historical, social, political, religious, and gender issues are often addressed during these lively in-class discussions. To explain the key concepts for each portion of the covered material the instructor has to facilitate and lead balanced and open criticism of the artwork, and challenge students to think outside of the box. In an online environment, when most of the knowledge is gained through reading (albeit from diverse sources), the student might feel the lack of direct instruction and suffer from the mere fact of an independent one-on-one struggle with the abundance of often contradictory interpretations and "readings" of the work of



art. Creating a similar discussion-intensive learning environment and fostering critical thinking, therefore, become the primary goals of online art history instructional design.

How can the online instructor ensure that students understand the key concepts, gain sufficient knowledge, develop critical thinking skills without the direct face-to-face interaction? In the online classroom, particularly in art history courses, the maximum and optimal use of discussion board or message board functionality is the tool to develop critical thinking. Discussion board assignments also help overcome the main disadvantages of asynchronous online art history courses — the lack of group communication involving instructors and students. These assignments are instrumental in creating a collaborative learning environment in an online classroom and providing a creative platform where students can successfully exchange ideas, and learn from each other. Studies on online teaching emphasize the importance of student-student and instructor-student interaction in creating collaborative learning environments and virtual classroom communities [2].

In addition to fostering critical thinking and creating a collaborative learning environment, discussion board assignments may be used to engage and motivate online learners. The importance of engaging students to achieve improved learning outcomes is widely accepted. The advantages of an engaged learning environment are discussed in studies on pedagogical aspects of online instruction [3]. The following section describes some of the techniques I have used to create an engaged and collaborative learning environment, approaches I have developed, experimented with and found to be effective in asynchronous online art history courses.

2. Assignments to Engage Students

A meaningful and in-depth analysis of the topic rather than information sharing is the main goal of instructional design of discussion board assignments in art history online courses. In my first few years of online teaching my course assignments and discussion board topics were almost identical to essays most commonly used in face-to-face traditional courses. Some examples of such essays are assignments asking to compare and contrast two or more works of art, describe a painting or a sculpture, or discuss methods used by artists to evoke specific emotions. The purpose is to test students' knowledge of characteristic features of different artists or styles, or to test their ability to identify connections between cultures. Students demonstrate their factual and conceptual knowledge, their ability to draw conclusions, to focus on similarities and differences between works of art. When I used this type of topics for discussion board assignments in the online environment the students' responses most of the time were very brief and minimalist. The length of their postings met the minimum of the assignment requirement; I require at least three hundred-word postings. Student participation in the forum was minimal or just enough to fulfill the participation requirement, while student-student interaction was formal, often devoid of any interest. Postings lacked enthusiasm or motivation; most of the discussions were based on reworded narrating of the textbook or reading material.

I was not satisfied with students' writing, overwhelmed and disappointed reading over and over the textbook ideas expressed in different words. I began my search for new approaches to try to bring the enthusiasm and the engagement of the face-to-face classes into the online environment. Gradually, I modified discussion board assignments to make them more intriguing, more specific, more anchored in the cultural and historical environment where the work of art was produced. In addition, I encouraged the students to be creative in choosing the format for their postings and to use their imagination, while following the principles of formal writing and proper citation rules. To my great satisfaction, I noticed drastic improvement in student submissions as well as in discussion forum participation. Peer feedback became more meaningful, more focused on the topic of the assignment. The quality of discussion postings improved, writings became lengthier and more detailed, often included facts and information outside the textbook and assigned readings. It was during this very first semester when one of my students posted a small play script for the assignment on Roman residential architecture. This is when I knew I was on the right track. This particular assignment placed the students in the first century Pompeii and asked them to invite a friend to their Pompeian house and show around the domus, meanwhile using the Roman terms for different rooms and explaining their purpose. In this play, the student composed a lively dialogue between herself, the hostess and her guest. Not only did she fulfill the requirements of the assignment and thoroughly described the purpose of each room, wall painting styles, furniture details, but she also found ancient Roman cooking recipes, described the plants and herbs growing in her garden using their Latin names, and even described the gourmet dinner prepared for her guest. Encouraged by enhanced learning

outcomes of the newly designed assignments I gradually completely redesigned all my courses, replacing essay-type topics with scenario type assignments. The results were so satisfying that now I use several scenario-type assignments also in my writing intensive face-to-face courses.

After designing fourteen online art history courses I came to believe that any discussion board topic as well as traditional in-class essay type of assignment may be successfully reworded and turned into an art historical scenario-based assignment. I saw that scenarios allow students to exercise their imagination, sense of humor, show their creative talent, and, most importantly, be motivated about the material and the coursework. The theory of instructional design supports this observation. According to Keller's model of motivational design among the methods for grabbing the learner's attention are games and role playing, humor, and inquiry. Inquiry arousal stimulates curiosity, which can be reached by posing challenging questions [4]. Some of the elements of Keller's model proved to be effective in the creation of an engaged learning environment in online art history courses. When discussion board assignments are designed in such a way as to stimulate active learning by causing curiosity and intensive inquiry, they motivate students.

3. Types of Discussion Board Assignments

Several techniques prove to be effective, including role playing and modeling of real situations. By slightly modifying the tasks and avoiding impersonal "describe, discuss, analyze" and replacing them with imaginative scenarios the learning outcomes drastically improve. If the topic allows the students to use their imagination and sense of humor, they are increasingly motivated to write detailed and thorough discussions and to display their knowledge of cultural and historic conditions of the society.

Almost every discussion forum assignment can be modified and turned to an exciting way of making art history come alive. These assignments place the students into factual historical contexts, make connections to students' lives, make them act in scenarios designed to encourage further inquiry into the details of the artists', commissioners', historical figures' lives. These engaging and intellectually stimulating assignments are particularly effective in fostering students' interest not only towards the art historical material but also towards the social, historical, religious conditions of the cultures; they encourage creativity, motivation, inquiry. Students introduce factual and conceptual knowledge into their discussions, look for additional information, carry out independent research, and find data to support their arguments. By personalizing assignments, the online instructor encourages creativity, motivation, inquiry, and engagement.

In art history courses students need to be able to compare the painting styles of artists. In the section on Baroque art I wanted the students to compare Rembrandt's painterly style with Rubens's paintings. Instead of formulating the assignment as "compare and contrast the two artists' paintings," I formulated the assignments as follows: "The year is 1625. You, Queen Anne of Austria, the wife of Louis XIII, King of France, would like to commission a portrait. Your mother-in-law, Marie de' Medici, recommends Rubens, her court painter, but you are stubborn, and would like to have it your way. You know about this aspiring young genius, Rembrandt van Rijn, who, despite his young age, is known for his portraits. In your discussion, you will evaluate both artists' portraits, will compare their styles and will choose the artist who will work on your commission. Will you follow the advice of your mother-in-law (after all, Rubens is the most sought-after portraitist in Europe)? Comment on your peers' postings. You are free to choose any form for your writing assignment, a letter to your brother, King Philip IV of Spain, or a chat with your minister". My goal was to make students study the main features of Baroque portrait art in Holland and Flanders.

The results were very satisfying. Students conducted research, found out that Rubens really painted Queen Anne's portrait in 1625, investigated the time period, its social and historical conditions, analyzed the two artists' approaches in interpretation of the sitter's personality. After that they made their choice, supported it with solid argument. Regardless of the format, discussions incorporated a detailed analysis of Rembrandt's and Rubens's painting styles, included comparisons of examples of portraits. Students also were able to exercise their sense of humor and displayed a deep knowledge of historical conditions of 17th-century Europe. Several students wrote the discussion in the form of a dialogue. Dialogues are one of the students' favorite formats for presenting the main concepts of the material. Students demonstrate creative playfulness and write discussions that are both original and informative. A dialogic format gives them an opportunity to provide explanations and information in the form of a lively conversation, to present contradictory opinions, to view the same phenomenon from different perspectives. They find this form both entertaining and informative because it allows conveying ideas in a creative and fun way.

Scenario-based assignments are equally effective when role playing is involved. When students are assigned roles, they often engage with extreme originality and they also interact with their peers in very creative ways. Role playing may be used in a variety of situations, small group assignments, or be left open to the entire class to get involved. It is an excellent tool for encouraging student-to-student interaction and creation of a collaborative learning environment in the virtual classroom. In the online environment role playing may be turned into a very intriguing learning experience. It may be used for reenactment of famous competitions, or imagining for example a social gathering of Poussinists and Rubenists. In the section on Early Renaissance art I ask my students to act as jurors of the 1401 competition of the wool merchant's guild, Arte di Calimala, for the bronze doors of the San Giovanni Baptistery, where they have to judge the entries on Sacrifice of Isaac by Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti. Students to engage in a constructive argument and lively conversation with opponents, consider differing opinions, convince other "jurors" to agree with their opinion. It is amazing how hard they try, support their views with factual material, analyze the two panels, compare their emotional impact, discuss their composition and formal qualities. Students seek supporting information in Lorenzo Ghiberti's Commentaries and Antonio Manetti's writings, refer to the Old Testament story, discuss Abraham's feelings, analyze how each of the panels conveys the story. They also learn to face the opponent, whose opinion might differ from their own. Students write passionate speeches, often with the same students posting several times, returning to the same assignment and engaging again and again in a debate with their peers. This type of knowledge construction is almost impossible in a traditional classroom or in the online environment with a more traditional and impersonal assignment formulated as "compare and contrast." Placing students in the 15th-century Florence creates an engaged learning environment where students learn and enjoy working on the assignment. Students see the history of art unfold through the eyes of its participants, Brunelleschi and Ghiberti, they are motivated online learners, their learning experience is more personalized, they are free and encouraged to exercise both curiosity and creativity – essential components of engaged learning.

Students become motivated because of the discussion board assignments. They provide very positive feedback about my courses, stress that discussion board assignments are interesting and intriguing. Here is an excerpt from a student feedback: "The role-playing element is exciting, it gives the assignment a certain flare and dynamic and really gets you involved in the mindset of the time period from a writer's perspective! Thanks for an interesting assignment, totally refreshing. Teachers usually have you just write about stuff without really having you get into the mindset of someone in the time period. I enjoyed reading other classmates' postings; it is really interesting to observe the way in which different students digest this assignment! I haven't had captivating writing projects like this since high school!" (Summer 2010, History of Art II, Southern Connecticut State University).

For many the intriguing nature of the assignments provided the opportunity to display their creative talent as some of these postings attest: "The discussion boards were interesting to write because I was able to use my creativity." (Summer 2010, History of Art I, Southern Connecticut State University). "I enjoyed being in this class. This class and the discussions were very interesting. My favorite discussion was about role playing. I don't think there were any boring discussions that we had" (Spring 2009, Art History II, Albertus Magnus College).

Judging from the responses provided by the students, they like when art history becomes alive.

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